Summary of the OSHA Ergonomics Program Standard

Why did OSHA issue an Ergonomics Program Standard?
OSHA has issued an ergonomics standard to reduce musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) developed by workers whose jobs involve repetitive motions, force, awkward postures, contact stress and vibration. The principle behind ergonomics is that by fitting the job to the worker through adjusting a workstation, rotating between jobs or using mechanical assists, MSDs can be reduced and ultimately eliminated.

Who is covered by the standard?
All general industry employers are required to abide by the rule. The standard does not apply to employers whose primary operations are covered by OSHA's construction, maritime or agricultural standards, or employers who operate a railroad.

What does the rule require employers to do?
The rule requires employers to inform workers about common MSDs, MSD signs and symptoms and the importance of early reporting. When a worker reports signs or symptoms of an MSD, the employer must determine whether the injury meets the definition of an MSD incident—a work-related MSD that requires medical treatment beyond first aid, assignment to a light duty job or temporary removal from work to recover, or work-related MSD signs or MSD symptoms that last for seven or more consecutive days.

What happens when the worker's job meets the standard's Action Trigger?

If it is an MSD incident, the employer must check the job, using a Basic Screening Tool to determine whether the job exposes the worker to risk factors that could trigger MSD problems. If the risk factors on the job meet the levels of exposure in the Basic Screening Tool, then the job will have met the standard's Action Trigger.

• Management Leadership and Employee Participation: The employer must set up an MSD reporting and response system and an ergonomics program and provide supervisors with the responsibility and resources to run the program. The employer must also assure that policies encourage and do not discourage employee participation in the program, or the reporting of MSDs, MSD signs and symptoms, and MSD hazards. Employees and their representatives must have ways to report MSDs, MSD signs and symptoms and MSD hazards in the workplace, and receive prompt responses to those reports. Employees must also be given the opportunity to participate in the development, implementation, and evaluation of the ergonomics program.

• Job Hazard Analysis and Control: If a job meets the Action Trigger, the employer must conduct a job hazard analysis to determine whether MSD hazards exist in the job. If hazards are found, the employer must implement control measures to reduce the hazards. Employees must be involved in the identification and control of hazards.

• Training: The employer must provide training to employees in jobs that meet the Action Trigger, their supervisors or team leaders and other employees involved in setting up and managing your ergonomics program.

• MSD Management: Employees must be provided, at no cost, with prompt access to a Health Care Professional (HCP), evaluation and follow-up of an MSD incident, and any temporary work restrictions that the employer or the HCP determine to be necessary. Temporary work restrictions include limitations on the work activities of the employee in his or her current job, transfer of the employee to a temporary alternative duty job, or temporary removal from work.

• Work Restriction Protection: Employers must provide Work Restriction Protection (WRP) to employees who receive temporary work restrictions. This means maintaining 100% of earnings and full benefits for employees who receive limitations on the work activities in their current job or transfer to a temporary alternative duty job, and 90% of earnings and full benefits to employees who are removed from work. WRP is good for 90 days, until the employee is able to safely return to the job, or until an HCP determines that the employee is too disabled to ever return to the job, whichever comes first.

• Second Opinion: The standard also contains a process permitting the employee to use his or her own HCP as well as the employer's HCP to determine whether work restrictions are required. A third HCP may be chosen by the employee and the employer if the first two disagree.

• Program Evaluation: The employer must evaluate the ergonomics program to make sure it is effective. The employer must ask employees what they think of it, check to see if hazards are being addressed, and make any necessary changes.

• Recordkeeping: Employers with 11 or more employees, including part-time employees, must keep written or electronic records of employee reports of MSDs, MSD signs and symptoms and MSD hazards, responses to such reports, job hazard analyses, hazard control measures, ergonomics program evaluations, and records of work restrictions and the HCP's written opinions. Employees and their representatives must be provided access to these records.

• Dates: Employers must begin to distribute information, and receive and respond to employee reports by October 15, 2001. Employers must implement permanent controls by November 14, 2004 or two years following determination that a job meets the Action Trigger, which ever comes later. Interim controls must be implemented within 90 days after the employer determines that the job meets the Action Trigger. Other obligations are triggered by the employer's determination that the job has met the Action Trigger.

Flexibility Features of the Ergonomics Program Standard

Employers whose workers have experienced a few isolated MSDs may be able to use the "Quick Fix" option to reduce hazards and avoid implementing many parts of the program. Employers who already have ergonomics programs may be able to "grandfather" existing programs. The employer may discontinue parts of the program under certain conditions.